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ABSTRACT

Attempts by the faculty at Baker University to introduce American undergraduates to the history of the Western tradition as part of their general education are described. The strengths and weaknesses of the Western civilization course and of the core curriculum formerly offered by the college are analyzed. The rationale for the interdisciplinary course now being offered, entitled "Shaping of Western Thought," is presented. The sophomore-level course focuses on three values that are highly prized in the Western tradition--love, peace, and freedom. The alternative ways in which these ideas have been understood by the residents of several major cities in the West are discussed. (Author/LBH)

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INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO THE WESTERN TRADITION: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

A Paper Presented to the Missouri Valley History Conference
by John C. English,
Professor of History, Baker University,
March 8, 1979

The paper which I am reading this morning refers primarily to a new interdisciplinary course in general education, to which the faculty of Baker University has given the title, the Shaping of Western Thought. This course reflects the faculty's conviction that, as a part of their college experience, American undergraduates should be introduced to the history of the Western tradition. It is one thing to commit yourself to such a goal and quite another to devise effective means of reaching it. Over the years Baker has tried first one and then another approach to the subject. SWT is the latest and, some of us think, the most successful of these efforts. I am supposing that you share our conviction concerning historical studies and general education. I hope that this description of our experiences will be of help to you and your colleagues as you think about the problems which these studies entail.

This paper consists of three sections:

First, a brief description of Baker University, which will establish the context in which the Shaping of Western Thought is presented to students;

Second, a review of Baker's earlier efforts to introduce undergraduates to the history of the Western tradition; this section in included because the outcome of these efforts has influenced, both positively and negatively, the design of the current program;

And finally, a description of and rationale for Baker's course on the Shaping of Western Thought.

Let us turn now to the first of these sections.

I.

Baker University is an independent liberal arts college related to the United Methodist Church. Chartered by the territorial legislature in 1858, Baker is the oldest institution of higher learning in what is now the State of Kansas. Abraham Lincoln gave one hundred dollars toward the construction of Parmenter Hall, the oldest building on campus still used for academic purposes. The college is located in Baldwin, a small town fifteen miles south of Lawrence and forty five miles southwest of Kansas City. It offers to students several undergraduate degrees, namely, the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Music Education and Bachelor of Allied Health Sciences. At the last Commencement, the fields in which the largest numbers of degrees were granted were biology, business administration, music education, sociology and physical education. In cooperation with Southern Methodist University, Baker offers a Master of Liberal Arts degree on the campus of the Barstow School in Kansas City, Missouri. During the current semester, 95 individuals are enrolled in the M. L. A. program and 829 men and women are enrolled in the undergraduate programs. The greater part of these students come from the states of Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma, although a total of 38 states and 15 foreign countries are represented in the student body. The faculty, counting both full-time and part-time teachers, consists of 80 persons.

I pass now to a description of two earlier efforts to introduce undergraduates to the history of the Western tradition.

II.

Between 1948 and 1967, Baker required each of its students, with a few exceptions, to take a two semester, six credit hour course on the history of Western civilization. (Later the title of the course was shortened to the "history of civilization;" this change reflected the faculty's re-definition of the course's goal. It was hoped to broaden the scope of the course so that it would include not only Western but also non-Western materials. For the most part this hope went unfulfilled; basically the course remained a Western civ. course to the very end.) This course was a typical survey, which began with the early Egyptians and Mesopotamians, moved to the history of the ancient Greeks and Romans, reviewed the history of western Europe during the Middle Ages and so continued down to recent times. The emphasis throughout was on the development of political institutions and upon relationships, both violent and pacific, among States. During the last two years in which the course was taught, the two years which I can describe on the basis of personal experience, approximately forty students were enrolled in each section; most of these students were freshmen, as befitted the introductory character of the course, although there was a fair sprinkling of juniors and seniors as well. The textbooks consisted of a standard political narrative, bound between hard covers, and a book of readings in paperback. These readings were short (usually 2 or 3 pages apiece) from the "great books" written during the periods we were studying.

Over the years, grievances against Western civ. slowly accumulated; eventually it was replaced by a course in the new Core Curriculum which the college adopted in 1967. I will describe the new Core in a few moments but before I do that, let me list some of the reasons why various groups were dissatisfied with Western civ. The History and Political Science Department, for instance, was unhappy for a variety of reasons. The members of the Department found that Western civ. occupied about half of their teaching schedules. Under these circumstances it was hard to offer enough advanced courses to meet the needs and speak to the interests of students majoring in history. The need, or so it seemed, to cover vast expanses of history within the bounds of a single year encouraged over-generalization and superficial treatment of the subject matter. The history faculty also complained that it was being asked to teach in areas in which it had received no advanced training. This, in turn, pricked the historians' consciences.

But they were not the only folk who were dissatisfied with Western civ. The general faculty complained that the course, with its focus upon political events, did not pay enough attention to cultural and intellectual history. In particular, the course did not provide enough historical background for work in literature and philosophy and it neglected the development of science and technology. Nor should we overlook the dissatisfaction among students. For many of them, the goals and objectives of the course, and the reasons why it was a graduation requirement, were unclear. This mystification was due in part to the faculty's failure to define clearly the purposes of the general education program and the place of the Western civ. course in it. It gave added point to student complaints that the

course was "irrelevant." Nor were students entirely satisfied with the theory of explanation which was implicit in the course. They did not share necessarily the historicist assumption that one explains something by identifying its origins and tracing its development from the point of origin to the present.[1]

Now let us turn our attention to the period between 1968 and 1976. During this era the center of Baker's general education program was the Core Curriculum so-called, six semesters of interdisciplinary courses extending across the freshman, sophomore and junior years. (From 1971 onwards the six semesters were reduced to four.) Two of these semesters were given over to the development of the Western tradition and it is to these that I will refer hereafter. At first this sequence was offered to members of the freshman class but later it was moved to the sophomore year. The sequence focused upon Western intellectual history and, in particular, upon the "climates of opinion" which characterized specific periods in the history of the West. Students were asked to read works by distinguished authors who were active in each of these periods. A series of paperback books, classics in translation we might call them, replaced the traditional textbook. The staff for the historical sequence was drawn from a dozen or more departments, primarily in the humanities and social sciences, including the Department of History and Political Science.

The Core program had many strengths, it seems to me. By bringing together teachers from many fields, expertise could be shared and the

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[1] On the meaning of "historicism," see Dwight E. Lee and Robert N. Beck's article under that title in the American Historical Review, LIX (April, 1954), especially pp. 568 and 577.

inevitable gaps in the faculty's aducation could be filled. The class time was divided between lectures delivered to the entire membership of the course and meetings in small groups of twenty students or so. This arrangement made possible discussions in which most of the group members could participate, something which had been impossible in the larger sections of the old Western civ. course. The Core made extensive and imaginative use of movies and other visual aids. Critical thinking was fostered; students were encouraged to take issue with the authors whom they were reading and they learned how to construct arguments in support of their positions. Writing skills were developed; students were required to submit periodically essays in which they reacted to the issues raised in the course.

While the Core program was an advance in many respects, it also had its shortcomings. Let me mention a few of these. As in the old Western civ. course, the Core tried to survey the entire Western tradition from its beginnings to the present. The problem of superficial treatment was compounded when members of various departments began to insist that particular works from their disciplines must be included in the syllabus. This meant that less and less time could be given to the consideration of each work. The organizers of the Core program thought of intellectual history in terms of "the climate of opinion or the Zeitgeist of particular periods of history."[2] They constructed their historical sequence accordingly. Each semester was divided into segments which corresponded to various periods of time. The intellectual climate of each period was expounded and the works of authors

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[2]Franklin L. Baumer, "Intellectual History and Its Problems," Journal of Modern History, XXI (September, 1949), p. 192.

who wrote at the time were read. Unfortunately it is notoriously difficult to choose a s mple of works which is truly representative of an age. This approach also raises the question of continuity and discontinuity in history. The kind of periodization which it requires may suggest that there is less continuity from age to age than is actually the case. Furthermore, in its efforts to define the central tendencies of a period, this approach may do an injustice to mavericks and dissenters, thus obscuring the richness and the complexity of the real world. In some ways, however, the most grievous fault of the Core sequence on the Western tradition was its failure to put the ideas under consideration into their proper social and cultural context. Little attention was given to the political institutions, the economic system and the class structure of the societies in which they emerged. I would submit that students, lacking this context, were bound to misinterpret these ideas and not to appreciate what they were reading.

III.

As stated earlier, the Core Curriculum was abolished in 1976. A new general education program which combines required courses and a set of distribution requirements was instituted. Among the courses specifically required is the Shaping of Western Thought, the interdisciplinary sophomore course to which this paper primarily refers. This course is in part an effort to build upon the strengths of the Core program and to remedy its shortcomings. More particularly, it reflects a shift in the way in which the college faculty perceives the purposes of general education. The question of values has come into sharper focus. The faculty feels that questions of

value must receive rather more attention than they have in the past, of the college is to prepare students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society and to help them to create for themselves personally satisfying philosophies of life.

The organization of the course on the Shaping of Western Thought resembles in certain ways that of the old Core. The course is required of all sophomores enrolled in the college (with certain exceptions). It extends across two semesters; during this time students can earn six hours of credit. Approximately one-third of the class time is devoted to slide lectures delivered to large groups of students; the other two-thirds is given over to small group meetings in which the assigned readings are discussed. By far the greater part of these readings are primary sources; with few exceptions students are expected to read the works straight through. The course is resolutely interdisciplinary; during the current semester, the staff of eleven persons represents a total of eight disciplines.

On the other hand, the Shaping of Western Thought differs from the Core program in several significant respects. Each course is focused upon ideas; in SWT, however, we have moved from "intellectual history," as understood by Franklin L. Baumer, for instance, to the "history of ideas," as exemplified by Arthur O. Lovejoy. That is to say, we have moved from the consideration of intellectual climates to "the history of <u>individual</u> ideas as such."[3] This move was made for a variety of reasons. In part it is an effort to reduce the scope of the course and to render it more

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[3]Italics in original; A. O. Lovejoy, <u>Essays in the History of Ideas</u> (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1948), p. 8.

manageable. The move is also an effort to be more concrete and specific and to pay more attention to nuance.

The ideas which we have chosen for particular consideration are three in number, namely, love, peace and freedom. We have settled upon these particular ideas for several reasons. As you will notice, each of them is a value which has been widely held and frequently discussed during the course of Western civilization. Today these values are still held before us as values to be achieved. Each of them can be defined in many different ways and each of them has many ramifications in everyday life. It is not surprising, therefore, that the meanings and richness of these ideas are not always grasped and that their implications for practice are not always understood. It is hoped that by reading and reflecting upon these values as they have been explicated in the past, students will come to a better understanding and appreciation of them and be encouraged to consider what they might mean for their own lives.

A further reason for choosing these ideas is this: We hope, through the consideration of love, peace and freedom, to engage the attention of students and to draw them into the work of the course. We believe that these ideas touch the interests of young people more closely than others which we might have chosen. As a part of our consideration of "freedom," for instance, we refer to relationships between parents and children; to what was called a few years ago, "student freedom;" and to ways in which sexual and occupational roles enhance or inhibit the freedom of the individual.

In the Shaping of Western Thought, the attempt to survey the whole of the Western tradition has been abandoned. We have adopted, rather, what

has been called the "block-and-gap method" or, less elegantly, the "posthole method." We have chosen to concentrate upon certain cities important in the history of the West and upon certain limited periods in these cities' histories. During the fall semester, Athens during the 5th and early 4th centuries B. C.: Rome in the 1st century B. C. and the 1st century A. D.; and Paris during the 12th and 13th centuries are considered. During the spring semester, Paris in the 18th century; London during the nineteenth and New York in the first half of the 20th century are featured.

We have chosen to concentrate our attention upon cities for several reasons. One of them is this: in cities individuals are in close and continuous contact with one another. This encourages the exchange of ideas and provokes creative thought concerning the values which we are considering. Most of our students either come from urban areas or will spend most of their lives in them. If we focus upon cities, perhaps we can relate to their experiences and help them to prepare for the future. Finally, cities are convenient units in which to study the continuous and mutual interaction between the natural environments in which people live, their social institutions and informal groups, individual personalities and the ideas which individuals hold. I call this the "texture" of history.

In conclusion, let me give you a concrete illustration of the way in which the Shaping of Western Thought works. Just now we are studying the city of London during 19th century. On Monday of this week the Director of the course delivered an illustrated lecture entitled "London and the Industrial Revolution." He described the effect of demographic and technological change upon the government and the conditions of life within the city.

The reading assignment for this lecture consisted of selections from Charles Dickens' novel, "Bleak House" and from Friedrich Engels, "The Condition of the Working Classes in England." On Tuesday a movie entitled "Early Victorian England and Charles Dickens" was shown twice; students could attend either of the showings that they wished. Yesterday they met in small groups with members of the staff to begin the discussion of George Bernard Shaw's play, "Candida." This play is set in the East End of London; it has something to say about economic freedom; what we would now call "women's liberation;" and the meaning of "love." This afternoon the staff will hold its regular weekly meeting, in which it will consider ways and means of presenting the next major assignment, which happens to be J. S. Mill's book, "On Liberty." Tomorrow the small groups will meet again and continue the discussion of "Candida." A similar round of lectures and discussions characterizes the entire semester.